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TESTIMONY OF JEANNE MILSTEIN, CHILD ADVOCATE
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Good morning, Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Jeanne Milstein. I am the Child Advocate for the State of Connecticut. I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Raised Bill # 6599, "An Act Concerning Discrimination."

This proposal simply adds gender identify or expression to Connecticut's non-discrimination law. This is another important part of the safety net for our children, particularly those who are most vulnerable. It will help ensure their safety and well-being. It is also a matter of fairness and equality. We don't want children harmed for who they are.

Today I ask you to think for a moment if your child, niece, nephew, grandchild was subjected to relentless harassment, bullying and discrimination because of who they are, or who they are perceived to be.

Certainly you would not want this child to be a victim of bullying, harassment and discrimination. You want your child to have all the opportunities to achieve his/her full promise and potential. You want them to grow and thrive and to have all of the necessary ingredients to become successful on life's journey. What I've come to know in my years as Connecticut's Child Advocate is that children need love, support, acceptance, understanding and a sense of safety and well-being. They also need laws as an essential aspect to help protect them. Again, this proposal assures the same fairness and protections for children who express their gender identify differently.

CGS 46a-51 already sets the foundation for assurances that provide protection of the law from discriminatory practices for the protected and vulnerable members of our communities, including children. These same protections should hold true for discrimination based on perceptions of gender identity or gender expression. It would be devastating and unacceptable.

And, I think that all of us can agree that any form of discrimination is simply not acceptable for our children. Issues of fair treatment have been at the forefront of my efforts on behalf of children.

These children are at greater risk of bullying, name calling, suicide and murder. The more gender non-conforming an individual is, the more extreme the sanctions-in the form of everything from name-calling to murder. For youth, gender difference is connected to harassment; abuse at home and at school. As Chairperson of the State Child Fatality Review Panel, I have seen the tragic consequences of bullying for children who may be perceived as different and not conforming to the norm. Adolescents, which we know at best is a difficult time for children, can be devastating for children who stand out, whether they dress differently, are too short, too tall, etc. etc. Adolescence is a time where conformity and acceptance are the norm. For children who are questioning gender identity or expression, adolescence can be unbearable.

Let me remind you of the tragic suicide of Joseph Daniel S, an 11 year old boy who committed suicide several years ago because he was so devastated as a victim of bullying.

The loss of promise hits home here in Connecticut. We are currently investigating two recent deaths of children to determine if bullying or harassment were contributing factors to their suicides. Please. Let's try and prevent these tragedies.

In addition to our child fatality work, over the years the OCA has been contacted regarding several children who were experiencing significant discrimination based upon their gender identity. Let me share with you the story of Jordan. Jordan is a wonderfully talented, compassionate and insightful individual. Jordan needed the advocacy support of my office to help with the issues associated with gender identity. We worked with community partners to ensure that Jordan was included in relevant school activities, was treated fairly and got the supports necessary to face many complicated life choices. The road for Jordan was not easy, nor the advocacy path, because no law fully protected Jordan from the significant discrimination encountered along the way.

Jordan has said that having the right people in her corner was key, but also having the law to support her could have made life so much less difficult. When one of our staff told Jordan that I was going to testify today and use her story as an example, she asked Jordan if she would like me to tell you anything. She wanted you to know that there were dark times when she thought that no one would accept her and that people just need to accept each other for who they are.

I urge you to pass this bill. It will offer an important safeguard to all children and adults. Please ensure the continued promise and potential of our vulnerable citizens. I believe that by supporting the measure you will be affirming and acknowledging that discrimination based on gender identity or expression will not be tolerated in Connecticut.

Thank you.